

LILA BURTON BJORKLUND

- i President of the State PTA**
- i Chair of the Board of Education**
- i Founder of Utah Youth Village**

“I have always believed that many people working together with love can create miracles.” Lila Burton Bjorklund, founder of Utah Youth Village, glows as she speaks of “her girls” –girls miraculously transformed to lead new lives.

When Lila Burton was nine years old, her father was killed in a shooting accident, leaving her mother with five children. Bereft of her father, poor even by the standards of the Great Depression, Lila developed a lifelong attitude of commitment and perseverance as she helped support the family. Through the personal suffering that followed, she learned compassion. A friend later said, “it just tore Lila’s heart to see people suffer –especially young people.”

Her marriage to Russell Bjorklund in 1936 introduced Lila to her life’s work. Lila has five children, sixteen grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. A deeply devoted mother, her desire to know everything about and do everything for her children resulted in her joining the PTA and other service organizations. Through these associations and through her husband’s work as principal of a Salt Lake City school, Lila Bjorklund became aware of many children that didn’t receive the support her family enjoyed. Her service to others grew out of her devotion to her family.

Lila’s dedication and abilities were quickly recognized by others. Elected chair of the PTA State Legislation Committee, she reported on proposed bills affecting youth. And she was indefatigable in her labors. When, for example, a bill arose to reform juvenile detention policies, she was at the capitol literally every day, cornering lawmakers and describing critical flaws in the existing system. She initiated legislation mandating testing of all newborns for PKU, enabling thousands of children to lead full, healthy lives. With unflagging concern for youth, she also influenced bills on issues such as child abuse and neglect, driver education, school lunches, and education funding.

During the sixties Lila was president of the state PTA and chair of the State Board of Education. With her children grown, she immersed herself in the work, volunteering forty- and fifty-hour weeks. She pioneered the PTA’s annual “critical issues conferences” and planned the first state conference on drug abuse. In the mid-seventies Lila Bjorklund was called by the LDS Church to serve on two special committees dealing with troubled young people in the Church and reviewing youth treatment facilities nationwide.

Her volunteer involvement throughout her life is staggering. She has been a member or officer of more than sixty state and national committees, boards, and councils. Although she has worked for varied causes, such as law enforcement, public health, and the mentally ill, her overriding focus has been what she calls “the young and rising generation.”

While working with the Salt Lake juvenile corrections system, Lila discovered an immense void. She saw girls who were suffering –abused, neglected, ungovernable– with no place to go. Many group homes and work facilities existed for boys, but the only alternatives for girls were jail or often-inadequate foster homes.

Convinced these girls would do well in a disciplined family environment with other girls their age, Lila conceived the idea for Utah Youth Village, perhaps her greatest achievement. Skeptics notwithstanding, she found volunteers and donors, and set out in 1969 to build a sanctuary, a structured place of protection and love, a place where miracles could happen.

After six years the first group home was completed. Says a former juvenile court judge, “Even though she had no money, she had a dream, a vision, and she went to work and got it done.” Thanks largely to Lila’s constant fund-raising efforts, Youth Village, heavily dependent on donations, has always met its obligations. In 1988 Utah Youth Village started helping boys as well.

When Lila first meets these boys and girls, whom she calls her grandchildren, few of them can see through the darkness and misery that enshroud them. They come with failing grades and grievous emotional scars. Most have been abused, and most have criminal records, from petty larceny to drug abuse and prostitution. They soon learn, however, how bright life is in its fullness; they learn of its defeats and victories, its sorrows *and* joys.

Like the prodigal’s father receiving his son with “a robe, a ring, and a fatted calf,” Lila welcomes the boys and girls with open arms. She wants to cultivate their potential, not crush their rebellion. Says she, “every child is entitled to live in a happy, wholesome environment where individuals are valued and loved.” After a year in this environment the youth have B averages in school and are confident, pleasant, self-disciplined and well-liked.

The following case in point is typical of Utah Youth Village. Kathy (not her real name) came to Utah Youth Village after being arrested for car theft. Then fourteen years old, she had been in eighteen foster homes and was extremely promiscuous, a drug abuser, and a borderline alcoholic. Her school record consisted of straight F’s, and she had dropped out. Although by nature strikingly beautiful, she had a hateful, fierce, almost frightening look. Gradually changing her life, Kathy completed the program eighteen months later, modest and beautiful, with a 3.9 GPA, and was nominated to Who’s Who in American High Schools. Now a successful paralegal in a Salt Lake law firm, she has bought a home and is in the mainstream of society.

A truly humble person who seeks no recognition, Lila focuses attention elsewhere when she is praised. This attitude symbolizes her life and her work. She established Utah Youth Village as a refuge for those in need, a refuge with effects that will long outlive the Village itself. “When we help one child,” she often says, “we help whole generations to come.”

Lila’s mentor in her life was her unselfish and kind mother. Even though widowed with a large family during the depression, Lila’s mother found the ability to help those around her. It was a powerful

example to Lila.

Perhaps her biggest challenges in life have been to raise the money and suffer the child welfare bureaucracy incompetency in her passion to help troubled child. “Being a female has been neither an advantage or disadvantage. People have treated me based on my ideas and passion, not on my gender. The men of Utah have been nothing but supportive of my efforts. Especially my wonderful husband has encouraged me and believed in me. Without his support I could not have accomplished what I have done,” said Lila.

At eighty-seven, Lila is now battling old age, going between her home and rehabilitation units. Yet, recently she told a reporter, “I wish I had more time to give.”